



Theory of the Modern

Alain-Marc Rieu

► To cite this version:

Alain-Marc Rieu. Theory of the Modern. East China Normal University Press. Multiple modernity. Culture, theory, problems. Chinese and European thoughts on Modernity., East China Normal University Press, pp.23-34, 2011. hal-00699183

HAL Id: hal-00699183

<https://hal.science/hal-00699183>

Submitted on 19 May 2012

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

PPF « Europe-Asie », Université de Lyon - Jean Moulin
University of Lyon – East China Normal University

Theory of the Modern

Shanghai, East China Normal University
11 & 12 April 2008

Alain-Marc RIEU
Professeur, Faculté de philosophie, Université de Lyon – Jean Moulin
Institut d'Asie Orientale (CNRS), ENS-Ish

Core concept of the Humanities and Social Sciences

At the age of globalization, societies and people share with the same urgency the same questions about modernity: where are we going? How did we come to that point? What is today the power of knowledge in the evolution of societies? What is the role and meaning of science and technology, of the arts and literature, of philosophy and the Humanities in general? In the end, all these questions revolve around the idea of the “Modern”.

The idea of modernity is born in Western Europe in the 17th century. It spread around the world with the colonial wars, with trade, industry, science and technology, but also with art and literature. But today many nations have made modernity their own. Europe and the United States do not dictate anymore what is modern and what is not. Various conceptions of modernity will soon compete with each other. Modernity does not belong to the West anymore but it has also become our common problem. Modernity is an ambiguous notion but we all share an experience of what it is, of what it means for individuals and societies. This notion is constantly used and abused by the Humanities and Social sciences, by the media, politicians and intellectuals.

The idea of the Modern is very confounding because it associates different notions, disciplines and cultural trends: pre-modern, opening, take-off, modernization, catch up, modernity, post-modern and even hypermodern. These notions are intertwined with a series of opposition: modern/traditional, develop/underdeveloped, industrialized/non-industrial, etc. From my point of view, these notions identify different moments within the evolution of societies. To distinguish these processes and analyze their relations is the best way to construct today a theory of the modern within the Humanities and Social Sciences. Each moment is itself a specific process acting as a module of change within an evolutionary chain. Each society formulates differently this process. Each module of change can repeat itself and be combined with other modules and processes.

Finally, these various moments cannot be conceived or assessed according to a given time scale, found for instance in Western Europe. Each stage can take months, years, even centuries. What matters is the duration and rhythm of an internal evolution. Each social system has its own historicity. This also means that the world is organized according to a wide diversity of trajectories and historicities.

1. Pre-modernization

The first module of change identifies a type of crisis: the increasing instability of a social system leading to a transition phase. This instability generates an evolution unpredictable according to the initial state of this social system. This system is then entering a pre-modernization process. This is not a “normal” crisis: this instability will not decrease and things will not return as they were. This is an internal process leading a given society up to the moment when its evolution generates its own transformation, a social, political, economic and cultural mutation. This process is not imposed from outside to this society but, as it is the case in Europe, China or Japan, it can be generated by pressure and competition from outside. Still this process is quite different from colonization or imperialism because the basic characteristic of colonization is to have broken down the capacity of colonized societies to change and adapt from within. Colonization is a type of conquest and domination, which tends to destroy the capacity for a society to evolve by itself and eventually reach a pre-modernization crisis. It imposes from outside an administrative and economic structure, which destroys social structures and therefore the capacity to change and adapt¹. This explains also why societies have resisted colonization by exploring and finding ways to transform from within, to modernize on their own ground and according to their own specificities.

Pre-modernization is not therefore a process, which happened in the past in certain societies and not in others. It is a process, which can repeat itself, each time differently. For instance, in the case of France, the May 1968 events have certainly expressed a trend toward a transition. Because, the meaning and depth of the 1968 crisis have been repressed and denied, France is stalled, incapable of reforming itself. Japan’s “lost decade”, from 1992 to 2005, might also indicate a similar crisis, a period of transition leading to a new state.

This explains why it is important to identify such crisis and to discern the structure of the pre-modernization process. This evolution requires at least three conditions.

- The first one is the saturation of the social system, such a high degree of complexity that reforming the social machine is impossible. No part can be change without changing the whole. Adaptation becomes impossible and this situation leads to a breaking point.
- The second condition is a growing social disorder. Not only the government but the social structure itself do not hold and control the population anymore. In Edo around 1780, the class (*han*) system was excluding and marginalizing around 50 % of the population, which was considered “classless”.
- The third condition is the formation of a new social group driving the evolution and articulating new values and competence. For example, the bourgeoisie (the merchant and entrepreneurial class) in Western Europe, the various groups in Tokugawa Japan specialized in the acquisition and transfer of knowledge who will become around 1850 the “Modernizers”. The capacity of these people to aggregate and control this evolution is a key factor of change.

¹ This is the reason why Colonization is a type of crime against Humanity.

2. The transition: rupture, opening, take-off

Rupture, opening and take-off name what happens within the transition: a social system is deconstructed and this deconstruction opens a path toward a different system. The causes of rupture are many. The cause can come from inside like in England in the 17th century or in France in the 18th. External pressure, like in Japan and China in the 19th century, can also play a decisive role. What is important in the rupture is the collective danger and frailty, the individual anxiety felt in all strata of society when the crisis turns into a transition toward a different and still unknown social and political order. The rupture can lead to dangerous denial and closure. But to reject change and deny the need for reforms like France in the mid-18th century or today do not repress the dynamics toward change; it just postpones it and makes it more radical, violent and uncontrollable. After the Terror episode, the French revolution led to a bourgeois order already in the card in the 1750ies. Accepting change instead of refusing it is commonly called the “opening”. It is the safest solution. It is safer for a country or an individual to accept change than to be forced or condemned to change. In the case of Japan, those who wanted to “save the Emperor and expel the barbarians”, were finally those who welcomed the barbarians in order to save the Emperor.

These are decisive moments and situations. Within a rupture, the frame of reference of people in situation of decision and power is invalidated at the moment when they need the most to evaluate situations in order to act. They need to make the most important decisions in a chaotic situation for which they are not prepared. Proper information, knowledge and experience are missing. Still they need to decide according to available knowledge and their limited perception of reality. Such situation is characterized by the “tyranny of small decisions”. Decisions made by people in charge will either have no impact or they will create a basis according to which further decisions will be made. This leads to a “take-off” phase: these partial decisions aggregate in a chain, which within time generates a “dependency path”, reinforcing itself and generating long term consequences. This is the reason why moments of rupture are crucial. The rupture turns into an opening leading to a take-off process, the formation of an evolution, which nobody really decided, wanted and masters. A new system is emerging or a new version of the social system. Therefore, people in power take decisions in a situation of urgency, without being able to anticipate their long-term consequences. This explains why successful leaders and institutions, today like yesterday, gain enormous and long-term power when their actions aggregate in a consistent pattern.

3. Modernization

What Modernization is, was or should have been, is apparently well known. This is an illusion. Modernization is commonly mistaken for the Modern itself. It is understood as a set of transformations leading to a state called Modernity tacitly defined as the present situation. In this scenario, Modernity sums up Modernization and appears to be its essence. There are various conceptions of modernization but all focus on one feature: the formation of an industrial economy, capitalist or non-

capitalist. More generally, Modernization is conceived as a social norm with three characteristics: centralization and bureaucratization, industrialization and urbanization, rationalization and *scientification*². But this definition is far too limited and ambiguous. It is important to note that democracy is not a defining feature of Modernization but one of its potential consequences. Therefore Modernization is possible without democracy or without a Western type of democracy.

By contrast, if Modernization is understood as a process in relation to a pre-modernization period and a transition phase, different perspectives become possible. The first one concerns time. Because Modernization is the outcome of a deep transition and a rupture with the past, it is for individuals and societies a project for a different future. People involved in such a project tend to perceive the present and their everyday life in retrospect, from the point of view of the future. It is well known that they tend to suppress the present under a future they are supposed to build and reach at the same time. Modernization is a collective speculation and gamble on the future. But, as we have seen, the future is neither free nor open. It is created according to a trajectory established by those who took power during the transition period: they opened a take-off process without being able to anticipate the trajectory and its long-term consequences. Something is emerging but nobody knows what it is and where it leads. But the modernization process is also conditioned by the capacity of people to understand the processes in which they are involved in order to find means to act upon them. This explains why Modernization is a self-reflective process and also why democratic institutions, i.e. the ideal of sharing power, knowledge and decision, becomes a major issue within Modernization.

This approach explains why there is not one model of Modernization to imitate, why there are many different trajectories. Modernization is multiple. The time has come to transform this multiplicity into an object of knowledge leading to a theory. Modernization is certainly too complex to be summarized in a few sentences, but a decisive element needs to be mentioned. A social system enters a transition phase when it has become incapable of adapting to changing conditions. Saturation is generated when the institutional arrangement between the various social functions, between the religious, the political, the social and the economy, becomes counter-productive. The rupture and the transition designate the period when these various functions transform their relations to each other and start evolving toward a new arrangement. For instance, in the case of Western Europe's modernization since the Renaissance, the power of the church and religion on society and politics was criticized and it receded. The main consequence was the formation of the modern State, the emergence of a "civil society" and finally the progressive formation and emancipation of the economic sphere, which transformed its relation with society and the State. This process is still active today and keeps transforming societies. The *neo-liberal turn* since the 1980ies is a new level of autonomy reached by the economy in all industrial nations. This is just an overall picture: each country where this rupture happened develops its specific type of arrangement between the State, the economy, society and politics. The problem is that these various arrangements or social systems have been competing

² *Scientification* names the instrumentalization of all knowledge according to a « scientific » model of research and communication.

with each other to such a degree that a dominant system has emerged and has been imposing its rule by instituting it as model for all societies.

4. Modernity, post-modern

Redefining Modernization is also to redefine Modernity. Modernity does not name *what* is modern because there is no essence of the Modern. Modernity identifies a specific moment in the articulated process I analyze. Modernity does not name what is modern, but the result and the end of modernization, *what* is now, in the present, modernized. This is what Baudelaire intended, what European societies had become in the mid-19th century. If Modernization is a process in which the present is envisioned from the point of view of a future state, then Modernity is the practical truth of modernization, the moment when Modernization reveals its real face. At this moment, the future dissolves in the present; the world, society and Humanity are perceived as what they have become, without any fantasy and ideals. There is nothing more to hope than what there is. Therefore, Modernity is the truth and despair of the Modern, the disenchantment of modernization with all the resulting anxiety and resentment, feeling of deceit, failure and treason that it entails. Its best formula is “no future”. The future is what there is in the everyday and nothing else. It is a painful moment when individuals, a nation or even a civilization reach a point when collective hopes and historical ideals vanish and reveal the reality of life in this society or this world. This is a sort of symbolic death. The problem is how to overcome this experience.

From this point of view, “post-modern” is the other name of Modernity, not what comes after the modern but what happens when modernization vanishes. The end of modernization project is exactly what Jean-François Lyotard identified as “the post-modern condition³”. This explains why Modernity, with its despair and resentment, is such an important moment in the evolution of a society. When a society transforms its relation to its own history, when people imagine their common evolution from the point of view of a future in rupture with the past, when individuals consent massive sacrifices in order to make this future happen, the loss of this illusion and the fall in the everyday is a collective trauma. Individuals and groups stop believing in collective ideals, even in private ones, in political institutions. They don’t trust anymore the State, including democratic institutions, because each one appears too remote, weak or corrupt to find a collective solution, incapable of repairing the social bond and appeasing personal anxieties. The everyday has overtaken the future. It is impossible to tell, which of Modernization or Modernity is the disease.

Baudelaire might be the first author to have articulated the experience of Modernity but many others expressed it within their own social and cultural contexts: Georg Simmel in his vision of the “Metropolis”, Max Weber with his “disenchantment of the world”, Robert Musil in his “disenchantment of Humanity”, Heidegger in his conception of the “Dasein” thrown in this world, Walter Benjamin in his interpretation of Baudelaire, etc. But the experience of Modernity is also remarkably expressed in essays and novels by Soseki and today by many East-Asian writers, critics and film directors. In each case, this despair is a criticism and even rejection of Modernization’s main characteristics:

³ *La condition postmoderne*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1979.

bureaucratization, industrialization, urbanization, and rationalization, all in contradiction with Life, Nature and Happiness. Modernity is a recurrent phenomenon, first expressed in German Romanticism, in mid-19th century Europe, in late 19th century Japan, in the 1920ies and 30ties in Germany, in the 1960ies in the whole industrialized world, etc.

Mentioning these historical moments proves that Modernity is a decisive and dangerous phase in the evolution of each society. In some ways, it can be compared with the transition opened at the end of pre-modernization. It is as destructive, with the difference that this module of change does not lead to a constructive process and a projection in the future. On the contrary, a transition is indeed opened but only to despair, resentment and anxiety toward the past, the present and the future. What is positive in this situation is the loss of illusion, the return to the everyday and the collapse of previous ideologies. Certainly such a situation is an appeal to knowledge, to theory and inquiry. The present and future will be what people will be able to understand and decide. But this appeal to knowledge is fragile because this loss of illusion is also an appeal to new ideologies in order to seal anxiety and discharge resentment. This appeal to ideology is the exact opposite to an appeal to knowledge. This explains why moments giving birth to dangerous ideologies have also been periods of major progress in knowledge.

5. Overcoming modernity, rejecting the Modern

We have little experience of the Post-modern. This cultural movement spread mainly in the USA and Japan in the late 20th century. A similar period might have happened already in the past but it remains difficult to identify it⁴. The problem is: what is the relation between the Post-modern and Modernity? Are there two different occurrences or two versions of the same process? We know where Modernity lead us in the past. We don't know yet where Post-modernism can take us. Will it remain an appeal to further progress in Human and Social Sciences or will it turn into new ideologies? Will these ideologies repeat past ones? Past experience shows that it is impossible to predict where Modernity may drive a society, what could tip the scale on one side or the other. The 20th century shows that Modernity is so deep an injury that the worst is possible. In the early 20th century, in Vienna and Berlin, major progress in physics, biology, mathematics, psychology, sociology and the arts was surrounded by racism, fascism, ultra-nationalism and in Germany the formation of Nazism. Philosophy was split between progress and regression. Marxist Communism was both a false science and an ideology. Modernity is a time of transition based on a deep reevaluation of past evolutions. Societies tend to reinterpret the past they had chosen to forget in their transition to Modernization. Modernity is a time when societies are in danger and becoming dangerous.

Finally, Modernity generated a major cultural and political dynamics to "overcome modernity". "Overcoming modernity" is the title of the "infamous colloquium", which took place in Tokyo in 1942. But it can also name a collective passion and ideal. To overcome modernity is to fill the void and the pain of the everyday, of a world, which appears to be nothing else but what it has become. People

⁴ See for instance, Masao Miyoshi & H.D. Harootunian (ed.), *Post-modernism and Japan*, Duke University Press, 1989.

were hoping for better lives, emancipation, equality and harmony with themselves, with the others and with nature. Now they feel exploited and unequal, living in the fear of greed, in personal and collective insecurity, in a destroyed, polluted and even dangerous environment. The future has betrayed Humanity, now the time has come to reverse the process and to restore the world as it was before the grand transition toward Modernization. This was the solution preached by fascism. But overcoming modernity can also take the shape of the opposite process: in this case, the goal and the ideal are to forget or negate the past, even by destroying it, in order to build a different world and a new community where all the contradictions would find a solution. This was the solution formulated by Communism in its different forms. These two movements are contrary to each other: the first one intends to return to the past or to reinvent it; the second intends to forget the past in order to erect a different future. But both movements are based in the despair of Modernity and intend to end this collective neurosis. Modernity is also a time of violence because of passions felt and because of false solutions. Overcoming modernity proved an extreme danger because it was a dead end. Because they failed to bring peace and relief, these imagined solutions reinforced violence. They finally lead to defeat and catastrophe and even the colonization of both Japan and Germany after 1945.

Today some societies have entered another type of overcoming: fundamentalism. It is a rejection of Modernity and Modernization. Today, we mainly experience religious fundamentalism. Islamic fundamentalism preaches a complete regression toward God, a God before it was institutionalized as a religion, an age of pure faith, where only God exists and is worth living for. Christian fundamentalism, in its present American version, rejects "spirituality", the idea of faith outside religious institutions. It preaches a regression toward the power of the church or of churches. But other forms of fundamentalism abound: religious, cultural, racial and others might appear. Because fundamentalism intends to restore in its purity a lost, degraded or forgotten state, because it is a regression and not a progress, it is a form of fascism.

6. Another opening. Another modernization?

Modernity is a time of moving sands at the end of a long itinerary. In the recent past, it opened a transition toward a process of closure and regression, which nobody at that time could really understand and prevent. The post-modern movement of the 1970ies needs to be understood as a repetition of Modernity. But it does not convey a feeling of despair; it expresses the failure and weakness of thought, of ethics and philosophy, of the Humanities in industrial societies because they failed at understanding and preventing fascism and totalitarianism, because many intellectuals, bureaucrats, managers, etc, participated in these movements. This failure expresses disillusion and doubt but not, at least for the moment, rejection. In the 1970ies, the Post-modern movement has mainly been an appeal to research and experimentation, a deconstruction of ideals, preconceptions and ideologies of both Modernization and soon, I hope, of Modernity. Indeed, in the last few years, something else is happening: the deconstruction process is becoming a transition toward a positive phase. Post-modern deconstruction has moved beyond the opposition between construction and reconstruction. This could be called an *affirmative overcoming*. We keep the memory of Modernization

and Modernity but we keep also the memory of the rupture and transition at their source. We have gained a fuller knowledge because we keep the scars of our past limitations and failures. We are in a time of repetition but what is being repeated is an experience of rupture and opening. Despair and resentment might now be overcome.

Modernity was more an ending than a rupture, combined with a false opening leading to a dead end. Today, the post-modern movement can be understood as another opening. This means that the idea of a new and different modernization process is opened in front of us. It is happening. In this situation, the Humanities and Social Sciences are able to question Science and Technology instead of denouncing or even rejecting them. This also means that we are already engaged in a take-off process. But now we know what being in a take-off moment means. Our capacity to think and debate, to understand the present, with all its built-in trajectories, is shaping what is to come. Our decisions and anticipations carry a knowledge, which recapitulates its history and sociology. This knowledge does not carry the guilt and the weight of Modernity and Modernization but it is aware of their lessons. Knowledge can address complex problems without projecting solutions in the future in order to address present issues. This different relation to time can be called the “contemporary”, what is occurring and what we collectively share. This sense of knowledge, responsibility and sharing define what I call “a knowledge society⁵”, beyond what is commonly called today a “knowledge economy”, even if it certainly embraces science, technology and the economy.

Conclusion

Instead of manipulating a confused idea of the modern, mixing modernization and modernity, never clear about what post-modernity really means, we have now an articulated process characterized by six concepts identifying historical moments and their relations. Modernization is not anymore the core of the Modern. Now we can debate and answer the two main questions of our times: where are we? In which time sequence are we engaged? Where are we going from here? I assert that the post-modern is not a repetition of Modernity but a new opening. Globalization can be understood as the latest phase of Modernization, spreading the despair of Modernity, the will to overcome the Modern. But it can also be understood as a new opening. So the question is: where are we going from here? Toward a return to our imaginary roots and idealized identities, toward to new types of nationalism? Or are we in a pre-modernization moment or even already in a period of transition? It means that the knowledge we collectively produce and share about the contemporary situation has a major impact on the future, on the possibility of a reopening, of a new or different modernization. I just hope to have contributed to this debate.

Alain-Marc Rieu, former student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, former Research Fellow at the Maison franco-japonaise (Tokyo), is presently professor of contemporary philosophy and epistemology at the University of Lyon – Jean Moulin and Research Fellow at the Institute of East-Asian Studies (CNRS) at the ENS-Ish. He is the author of many articles, studies and books listed at his website: <http://w3.ens-lyon.fr/amrieu/>

⁵ <http://www.scu.edu/sts/communityofscholars/RieuArticle.cfm>